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ABSTRACT

This brief paper reports on a study of the practices at four high schools selected for how closely they aligned with criteria and indicators illustrative of authentic and inclusive learning for all students. A table presents profiles of the four schools in terms of setting, students, and practices. Classroom observations, interviews, surveys, and analysis of assignments and student work resulted in the following major findings across the four schools: (1) a high set of expectations and positive post-school success were embraced for all students; (2) regular education teachers were firmly committed to inclusion of students with disabilities; (3) teachers using more intellectually demanding instructional tasks receive work from both disabled and non-disabled students that is more authentic; and (4) in assessment activities, approximately 70 percent of students without disabilities and all students with disabilities received some accommodations. Implications of the study include that the emerging state-wide assessments associated with recently adopted academic learning standards post significant threats to high school reform efforts aimed at promoting authentic and inclusive learning. (DB)

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High Schools with Authentic and Inclusive Learning Practices: Selected Features and Findings NCSET Research to Practice Brief

By
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High Schools with Authentic and Inclusive Learning Practices: Selected Features and Findings

Compiled by L. Allen Phelps[1]

Introduction

Educational reform in America's high schools remains one of the flashpoints of federal and state policy, as well as a major focus of professional debates and local school improvement efforts. Over the past decade, a series of comprehensive school reform efforts, paying particular attention to elementary schools and urban communities, have been led by consortiums involving researchers, school reform advocates, and public and foundation funders. Unfortunately, high school reforms that include students with disabilities have received limited attention in the ongoing, national school improvement conversation.

With funding from the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs, the Research Institute on Secondary Education Reform (RISER) for Youth with Disabilities at the University of Wisconsin-Madison has studied reform efforts in four U.S. high schools. School reform practices in these schools are aligned with specific research criteria developed to highlight authentic and inclusive learning practices for all students. Authentic learning practices involve students in using disciplined inquiry (e.g., problem-solving processes) to construct in-depth knowledge for themselves and others (e.g., community service projects). In earlier work on school reform, Newmann and Wehlage (1995) discovered that these features of authentic learning and instruction were common in schools that realized significant gains in overall student achievement, as well as reductions in the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students. At RISER, inclusive learning refers to the use of developmentally and individually appropriate accommodations and supports, which ensure that authentic learning is personally meaningful for students with and without disabilities.[2]

Profiles—Schools, Students, and Practices

Following an extensive national search for restructuring high schools featuring authentic and inclusive learning (Schools of Authentic and Inclusive Learning [SAIL]), four high schools were selected. Schools were selected based on how closely they

[1] The research findings presented herein were compiled from the work of several RISER investigators including Drs. Jeffrey Braden, M. Bruce King, Cheryl Hanley-Maxwell, Jennifer Schroeder, and Marianne Mooney.

[2] For details see: Hanley-Maxwell, C., Phelps, L. A., Braden, J. & Warren, V. (1999, July). *Schools of authentic and inclusive learning* (Brief No. 1). Madison, WI: Research Institute on Secondary Education Reform for Youth with Disabilities, Wisconsin Center on Education Research, University of Wisconsin, Madison.

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aligned with the criteria and indicators that were illustrative of authentic and inclusive learning for all students. Each of the RISER school sites had considerable experience in implementing a set of locally designed reforms. As suggested by the profiled features in **Table 1**, these high schools are highly unique. However, it is noteworthy that two of the schools operate in ethnically and culturally diverse communities, and each school enrolls students with complex and challenging educational needs.

Common Features and Selected Findings

As noted above, educational communities were sought that included students with disabilities and maintained a focus on authentic and challenging academic standards— seeing neither as mutually exclusive nor competing. While students' access to instruction of high intellectual quality varies across the schools, authentic teaching is a prominent element of the school's mission and valued widely in several schools. Over several years, these schools developed strategies for ensuring that "all children achieve the highest educational standards possible." More than a marketing or political tagline for school improvement efforts, these strategies are reflected in what students and teachers do each day as part of their graduation portfolio, internship, community service project, or professional learning community.

Each of these schools has idiosyncratic and somewhat uneven approaches to authentic and inclusive learning practices. In two schools, the faculty view authentic teaching (e.g., assisting students in constructing and sharing new knowledge through disciplined inquiry) as the core focus. In each of the schools, school-wide practices for delivering a continuum of services and supports are featured, (e.g., the use of personal learning plans for all students). These practices ensure that students with disabilities have access to the general curriculum and enhanced opportunities for meeting graduation standards. In all four schools, innovative and creative approaches are being implemented to address and focus the long-standing debate on the multiple purposes of

Table 1. **A Profile of RISER High Schools**

	School A	School B	School C	School D
Setting	Urban secondary school, 520 students in grades 7-12	Rural high school, 480 students in grades 9-12	Suburban-rural, 1000 students in grades 9-12	Small-city high school, 1000 students in grades 9-12
Students	Hispanic—52% African—45% Title I—37% Students with Disabilities—22%	Caucasian—98% Title I—2% Students with disabilities—16%	Caucasian—98% Title I—2% Students with disabilities—17%	Caucasian—75% Native—15% African—1.6% Latino/a—8% Title I—17% Students with disabilities—11%
Practices	Integrated academic curriculum	Individual learning plans for all students	Service learning requirements	Self-advocacy and study skills instruction for students with disabilities
	Service learning and internships	Professional development school designation	Senior project graduation requirement	Team teaching by regular and special educators
	Graduation by portfolio and exhibitions	Several community based learning options	Critical Friends Group for staff development	Extensive inclusion supports in place

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secondary schools, that is, to educate all students well, to prepare students for college and/or the workplace, and to prepare engaged citizens.

At three of the four sites, the school's vision was created by a local leader or a small group of leaders some 5-10 years ago. Full implementation, along with efforts to maintain the vision and associated practices, have been constrained by the turnover in school leadership, the recent emphasis on state standards and high stakes assessment, and, in some cases, local and state funding. Since state assessments generally use paper and pencil, closed-response items, teachers and principals view state assessments as significant threats to authentic and inclusive learning practices. These practices support the use of projects or elaborated written or oral communication as a primary means for assessing student learning.

Classroom observations, interviews, surveys, and analysis of assignments and student work have revealed the following major findings across the RISER schools:[3]

1. A high set of expectations and positive postschool success is embraced for all students. In results from faculty surveys, there were no measurable differences in and across seven highly rated employment, college-related, or personal outcomes that were expected for graduates with and without disabilities.
2. Regular education teachers across all four schools were firmly committed to inclusion. Students with disabilities in the four schools had access to generally the same instructional and assessment practices as their non-disabled peers. Challenging lessons and assessments were provided to mixed groups of students that included students with disabilities. At all four schools, at least some of the teachers conducted lessons of high intellectual challenge for both students with and without disabilities.
3. Teachers using more intellectually demanding instructional tasks (e.g. requiring analysis and interpretation) receive work from both disabled and non-disabled students that is more authentic. In samples of students' work on 35 teacher-developed tasks, 62% of students with disabilities produced work that was the same, or higher, in quality than that produced by their nondisabled peers. With more challenging instructional tasks, students with disabilities performed better than both students with and without disabilities who received less demanding assignments.
4. In assessment activities, a high percentage of students without disabilities (approximately 70%), along with all students with disabilities, received accommodations such as reading directions and discussing similarities between the task and previous tasks.

Implications and Challenges

The data and findings from studies and observations in schools with authentic and inclusive learning practices offer several interesting insights and perspectives.

1. Reform efforts that are generated by and sustained from the local level (as contrasted with top-down models of reform) are fragile and generally difficult to sustain. However, they can sustain powerful professional communities that, in turn, strengthen instructional practices that lead to measurable impacts on student learning and commonly shared postschool outcome expectations for graduates with and without disabilities.
2. Educators at RISER schools indicate that the emerging state-wide assessments associated with recently adopted academic learning standards pose significant threats to high school reform efforts, especially those aimed at promoting authentic and inclusive learning in both school and community settings.
3. Minimally, creating and sustaining authentic and inclusive learning practices in high schools requires a coherent vision for, and models of, appropriate performance-based assessment procedures. The RISER schools offer some promising practices for those interested in successful inclusion. However, the major implementation challenges for school leaders are: (a) developing a strong professional learning community among regular and special educators, (b) building connections with partners (e.g., parents, local businesses and cultural institutions, civic and governmental agencies) to provide authentic and inclusive learning practices in multiple contexts for all students, and (c) creating incentives and systems for reflection and continuous improvement.

[3] The RISER Research Briefs listed in the references provide additional findings.

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Web Resource

Research Institute on Secondary Education Reform (RISER)
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